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# First nest record for Bronze-winged Courser *Cursorius chalcopterus* in Senegambia

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Un nid actif d'un Courvite à ailes bronzées *Cursorius chalcopterus* a été découvert dans la région de Kiang West en Gambie le 14 février 2002. Il s'agit du premier nid de cette espèce trouvé en Sénégal. Il était situé dans un terrain ravagé par un feu de brousse un mois auparavant. Les œufs se trouvaient dans une légère dépression, peut-être parce que le sol était friable et comprenait des débris végétaux incinérés. *Birds of Africa* mentionne qu'aucune cuvette n'est grattée dans le sol. L'auteur a mesuré le nid et les œufs, et a collecté des sacs fécaux sur le site. En outre, il détient des spécimens tués accidentellement sur les routes et à Banjul. Cette espèce passe facilement inaperçue et les observateurs visitant la Sénégalie sont invités à soumettre leurs données à l'auteur.

## Introduction

There are sight records of Bronze-winged Courser *Cursorius chalcopterus* in The Gambia in all seasons, and in all five administrative divisions including coastal areas. It is widespread in northern and southern Senegal but is not found in coastal regions. Breeding has long been suspected as likely in The Gambia but a nest has never been discovered<sup>1,6,7</sup>. A highly developed nocturnal lifestyle and a strategy of remaining motionless, typically within the shade, under an emergent sapling during the day, results in it going under-recorded. Most observations in The Gambia are the result of night-drives when birds are occasionally sighted beside roads and tracks. Even more rarely, individuals are flushed from cover by chance in daylight, normally resulting in a low, short flight and immediate disappearance into scrub on landing<sup>1,8</sup>. At night it is often in the loose company of Black-headed Plover *Vanellus tectus* and Spotted Thick-knee *Burhinus capensis* both of which also have nocturnal habits and come to roads at night in The Gambia, particularly during and after the rains<sup>1</sup>. Bronze-winged Courser is typically but not exclusively associated with the Guinea-Sudan Savannah biome, eg there are a few records on dry sand-pans near water and coastal mangrove at Tanji Bird Reserve (pers obs).

## Recent records

In The Gambia a known population stronghold was in Lower River Division (LRD), within and adjacent to Kiang West National Park. In December 1975, ten were observed at dawn on a stretch of c50 km of main road adjacent to the park<sup>6</sup>. However, regular searches for nightjar *Caprimulgus* spp casualties<sup>2</sup> at dawn by the author over the same road in recent years have produced very few courser sightings. Two fresh, car-killed specimens were collected (most recently on 27 January 2002), both near Kwinella, in LRD (13°24'N 15°48'W) were very badly damaged and only the

wings were salvaged. An immaculate specimen of a Bronze-winged Courser was found dead against a glass door on a third-floor balcony at the hotel where I live on 13 April 2002. The balcony faces directly over the River Gambia estuary a few metres away. The specimen has been retained (in DMSO), a female with an active ovary containing a pea-sized yolky egg (wing chord 185 mm, wingspan 580 mm, bill 24 mm, tarsus 75 mm, weight 140 g, gizzard 4 g, no fat and no moult).

While on a one-week (8–15 February 2002) round-country photographic safari with Paul Manners we came across a calling Bronze-winged Courser at 19.35 hrs on 13 February, in Kiang West, LRD (13°21'N 15°50'W). These calls were tape-recorded using a Telinga microphone within a folding parabola and a Sony TC-D5M recorder, and later checked against the track for Bronze-winged Courser in Chappuis 2000<sup>1</sup>. The following morning between c07.30 and 10.00 hrs we sound recorded and photographed Temminck's Courser *C. temminckii* on burnt and denuded agricultural land near the village of Jiroff, LRD (13°25'N 15°35'W), c15 km east of the Bronze-winged Courser site. Fourteen Temminck's Coursers were present and a comprehensive set of photographs was taken of general behavioural activities. Sound recordings of the high, arching aerial displays of birds sallying far out and returning to the group were also made. No nest was found and the birds generally exhibited pre-nuptial behaviour. Sound recordings of both courser species will be included in a forthcoming three-CD set to *Bird Song of The Gambia and Senegal*<sup>3</sup>. (Weaker recordings of Bronze-winged Courser were made at dusk near Georgetown (13°32'N 14°46'W) in Central River Division, on 30 January, in the immediate vicinity of the River Gambia.)

At midday on 14 February we returned to the area of Kiang West where we had recorded Bronze-winged Courser the previous night. Within a few minutes we found two standing somnolent at roost under a burnt, leafless *Combretum* sapling and many photographs were taken over

a 20-minute period. The birds permitted very close approach. The roost site was inspected for faecal debris and one fresh pellet was collected, sun-dried, and on inspection under a binocular microscope was found to contain the wing cases and mandibles of small beetles. The sample has been retained. The same evening more sound recordings were made. At least three individuals were answering each other over a transect of 600 m.

At midday on 22 February I revisited the 14 February roost site, and one individual was observed on a nest in direct sunlight, with the off-duty mate stationed c3 m away. The nest depression had two eggs. The area had been extensively burnt in mid-January (pers obs) and the soil substrate was crumbly and granular, mixed with fragments of *Andropogon* grass and other incinerated vegetation. This could explain why a minor, albeit distinct nest depression was evident, perhaps as a result of the incubating birds shuffling the eggs on the soil. *BoA* states that no scrape is made<sup>6</sup>. All of the many breeding records I have for Temminck's Courser in The Gambia have involved eggs laid on hard, sun-baked earth, and always next to animal dung in treeless, open harvested fields, with several also having small stones in the immediate vicinity.

The nest scrape measured 100 mm x 90 mm and both eggs measured 35 mm x 25 mm. The depression was c12 mm deep in its centre. Placing a digital thermometer on the ground close to the nest, in direct sun at 13.30 hrs, a temperature of 38.5°C was recorded. Ground temperature at dawn was 23°C. The incubating bird ran to the nest and settled on the eggs immediately I left the area. I made further observations from c25 m away. This first Senegambian nest observation accords well with Nigerian data, where eggs and young have been recorded in February–March<sup>5</sup> with laying in January–February<sup>8</sup>. Burkina-Faso laying dates are May–June<sup>8</sup>. No other information for Upper Guinea is known to me. Further nocturnal work covering more areas of The Gambia and Senegal (in Upper River Division and along the coast respectively) is required to establish the true status and distribution of this courser. Visiting birdwatchers could assist by forwarding any relevant records to the address below. To establish the species' presence, field workers are advised to familiarise themselves with the eerie and evocative twilight call of this elusive bird, which appears able to adapt sufficiently well to the changing fire-tolerant vegetation in the area discussed. Work on sedentary bird communities of vegetation zones in fire-adapted equilibrium, in Senegambia, would be a potentially interesting area of research.

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